10-20-2009

The Curious Case of Jia Junpeng, or The Power of Symbolic Appropriation in Chinese Cyberspace

Guobing Yang

Barnard College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive

Part of the Asian History Commons, Asian Studies Commons, Chinese Studies Commons, and the International Relations Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/561

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
The Curious Case of Jia Junpeng, or The Power of Symbolic Appropriation in Chinese Cyberspace

October 20, 2009 in blogging, China Behind the Headline by The China Beat | 3 comments

This essay was originally presented at New Media and Global Transformations, a conference that took place at Columbia University on October 9, 2009. It has been adapted for China Beat.

By Guobin Yang

An Uncanny Story[1]

On July 16, 2009, an anonymous internet user in a popular Baidu discussion forum posted a message titled "Jia Junpeng, your mother wants you to go home to eat." The message has only twelve Chinese characters in its title and has no other content. Yet it got 3,000 responses within five hours, responses that range from the routine socializing type ("Support!" "Interesting!") to the funny and sarcastic ("I am not going to eat at home today. I'm eating in the Internet bar. Please pass on my message to my mom."). Within one day, it received seven million hits and 300,000 comments. Large portal sites like sina.com, netease.com, people.com and newspapers like Southern Metropolis began to cover it, adding to its popularity. A cryptic posting was thus turned into a national media event. Jia Junpeng became a household word in Chinese cyberspace overnight.

No one knows who posted the message or who the Jia Junpeng in the message is. In their responses, many people doubted whether the Jia Junfeng in the posting refers to a real person. The name might just have been made up by whoever posted the message.

As people were puzzling over this bizarre phenomenon, two new developments happened. First, several business firms claimed that the Jia Junpeng event was the product of their online marketing. The CEO of a new media firm, for example, alleged in early August that the entire event had been created by his firm. He claimed that his firm had hired over 800 marketing personnel, who then registered over 20,000 user IDs to post responses to that cryptic sentence, thus turning it into a national media event. None of these firms has released evidence to prove their claim. It is possible that their real marketing strategy is to try to get some share of the media limelight by making a sensational claim. Even if these claims are unsubstantiated, however, they do suggest that it is possible to manipulate or manufacture public sentiments in cyberspace.

The story does not end here. Just one day before the Jia Junpeng message appeared, a blogger by the name of Guo Baofeng was detained by local police in the town of Mawei in Fujian province. Guo Baofeng was accused of using his blog to spread rumors about local police. At the police station, he secretly sent a text-message asking for urgent help: "I have been arrested by Mawei police. SOS."

Upon receiving this message, his friends started campaigning for his release. Inspired by the Jia Junpeng posting, one well-known blogger called on people to send postcards with the phrase "Guo Baofeng, your mother wants you to go home to eat" to the police station where Guo was detained. The address of the police station was posted online. This created a "postcard movement." Some well-known names in the Chinese blogosphere began sending postcards to Guo Baofeng through the post office (whether they reached Guo is another matter). Similar messages were posted in online forums. Although it is not clear how much this postcard movement might have helped, Guo Baofeng was soon released.

It is mind-boggling that such an innocuous short sentence could generate so much interest and then was appropriated in rather surprising ways. What does it tell us about new media and social transformation in China?

I think the main message is that in China today, the internet can always be appropriated by users for their own purposes, however closely it is monitored or controlled. Much more than the newspaper and television, the internet depends on user participation. Bulletin boards, blogs, video web sites, social
networking sites all depend on users to contribute content if they are to survive. As long as this feature does not change, internet users can always make creative or subversive use of it.

**Why do people appropriate the Internet?**

The Jia Junpeng case shows that there are both general and specific reasons that users appropriate the Internet. At a general level, their appropriation of Internet forums and spaces is a reflection of social sentiments. Chinese commentators point to the sense of alienation and isolation in contemporary life. Many responses to the Jia Junpeng posting express feelings of boredom. One post says, for example, “What I am posting is not a post. I am posting loneliness.” Other social sentiments, such as nationalism, patriotism, and anger with corrupt officials have also electrified Chinese cyberspace from time to time.

Specific reasons for appropriating the internet vary a great deal. In the Jia Junpeng case, Chinese observers have remarked that it was at least partly an outpouring of frustration by members of that particular online forum. The forum is set up for players of the popular game World of Warcraft. At that time, the parent company of World of Warcraft, Blizzard Entertainment, had just selected netease.com as its new China representative. In preparing to launch the game, however, netease.com had encountered difficulties in obtaining a license. On June 30, 2009, Netease issued a public statement apologizing to consumers for the delay in launching the game. This was frustrating to the members of the forum. Thus, the Jia Junpeng posting became an occasion for expressing their frustration. This would seem to suggest a kind of consumer activism – people appropriated the Jia Junpeng message to express their dissatisfaction as consumers of a popular internet game.

Users also appropriate the Internet for political purposes. This is what happened when the Jia Junpeng phrase was later used by Chinese bloggers to call for the release of activist-blogger Guo Baofeng. At that point, an innocuous and cryptic phrase turned into a potent political slogan.

It is well known that the Internet is closely monitored and controlled in China. How can people use it for subversive purposes?

The issue is not simply a matter of citizen expression versus state control, or freedom versus repression, though these are of central importance. Even during more controlled periods such as the Cultural Revolution, there were what Tang Tsou calls “zones of indifference” which state power did not try to penetrate or control. In some ways, cyberspace is easier to control. A vast online community, for example, may be monitored from a small central control office. Entire networks can be shut down. Yet this does not mean Chinese cyberspace does not have its own “zones of indifference.” Gaming communities, like the one where the Jia Junpeng case happened, are less of a concern for state authorities than online forums on current affairs. In Chinese cyberspace there are also issues of indifference to the state – everyday-life issues that do not touch on the state’s central nerve systems. The Jia Junpeng posting is such an issue (if it is an issue at all). Yet as often happens in Chinese politics, it is through these zones and issues of indifference that people begin to make difference. There exists only a thin line between matters of indifference and difference.

Moving beyond the state-society framework, we will also need to look at the multiple dimensions of the Internet – its economics, culture, society, as well as politics. The government is not the only player in this game. There are other players as well, especially commerce and community. Internet businesses have a vested interest in encouraging user participation. Online communities are an essential component of all major commercial web sites, because they help to build a user base and attract web traffic. Commercial and social forces thus provide favorable conditions for user participation.

**Why are some internet postings transformed into major media events, while numerous others attract no attention at all?**

Here the Jia Junpeng message poses the ultimate challenge. Does it make sense that such an apparently pointless phrase should instantly go viral in Chinese cyberspace? On the internet in the US, for example on YouTube, there are also postings or videos that occasionally go viral. Although analysts
have puzzled over such phenomena and business firms have picked up the concept of viral marketing, no one knows yet why, when, and how a YouTube video or internet posting will go viral.

It seems to me that Internet postings become popular and are widely circulated for the same reasons that folk sayings, folk songs, legendary tales, rumors, or even forbidden books have always been circulated. These popular cultural forms often enjoy no official support. In fact, state authorities often try to suppress them. And yet they have always managed to find their way into society and enjoy wide if sometimes surreptitious circulation.

The reasons are more social than technological. After all, folk sayings and rumors, which are traditionally among the fastest to spread, are low-tech cultural forms. They circulated by word of mouth or relied on primitive media forms (such as hand-copied manuscripts during China’s Cultural Revolution).

Most cases of popular Internet incidents in China, like the Jia Junpeng case, are fairly low-tech by the standards of rapidly developing digital technologies. They happen mostly in online bulletin board systems. People occasionally use cell phones to post messages in online forums. There are sometimes postings of digital images. But most interaction consists of text-based BBS postings. BBS is a dated form of network service in the US, but in China it is still a major platform for online interaction. Blogs and social networking sites are catching up, but their influence still pales in comparison with BBS. The main reason for the sustained popularity of BBS in China is history and culture. Generations of Chinese Internet users, whether they are high school students, college students, or urban professionals, started with BBS when they first went online. As a result, there has formed a rich and dynamic culture of BBS that encourages participation. There is even a form of competitive participation as people try to outdo one another in their jokes.

Another social factor that helps to explain why some postings go viral is the issue under discussion. The Jia Junpeng case is exceptional in the sense that the original posting did not have a clear issue (only the forum members knew they were angry with the delayed launch of their favorite game) and it was in the middle of interaction that people attached issues to it. In less exceptional but equally popular cases, the issues usually resonate with the public. They are often emotionally stirring. They typically concern blatant violations of law and the norms of social morality, such as corruption or violence inflicted on the poor and the vulnerable the rich and powerful. Cases like the death of Sun Zhigang in 2003 or the abduction of teenagers into slave labor in 2007 immediately come to mind. These and other similar cases pressured government authorities to take action after provoking public uproar.

Finally, one must not underestimate the power of play in online interaction. Play is a social act, an essential ingredient for community. Many responses to the Jia Junpeng message are sexual jokes, jokes about family life, workplace relations, school life, and so on. People compete to see who is funnier. Such playfulness is typical of Chinese Internet culture in general – recall how Chinese netizens have recently played with the Grass-Mud Horse or the Green Dam Girl. There is evidently also abundant play in the case of Jia Junpeng and the postcard movement.

Play is also a creative act. The social history of the Chinese Internet in the past ten years is a history of play. Indeed, it is a history of growing playfulness. In content, design, and style, today’s web sites in China are a world apart from those in the late 1990s. In the early 1990s, when Chinese students overseas began to run Internet magazines, those magazines did not look very different from the print magazines they had been familiar with. Today, it is hard to imagine how many different forms Internet publications have morphed into. When personal homepages were in fashion in the late 1990s, people were publishing their personal diary entries, a predecessor of today’s blogs. Yet even a cursory comparison will show how much more playful today’s blogs are compared with the web diaries in the “primitive” days of the Internet. And of course, for those who do not often go online, Chinese Internet culture presents a different kind of challenge – there is a whole new language that netizens have invented in the process of play, a language that makes little sense to those who do not partake in the play. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that the main features of Chinese Internet culture today are the products of a history of play.
All this is to say that the seemingly curious case of Jia Junpeng is not so curious after all. A pointless phrase does not go viral in cyberspace for no reason. I am not saying, though, that the circulation of an Internet posting is the same as that of a rumor or folk saying in earlier times. The Internet differs in one crucial aspect. It changes the speed and scale of communication. When large-scale communication happens rapidly, the speed of social transformation quickens and the frequency of transformative events increases dramatically. Consequently, it creates a more acute sense of immediacy and urgency in our consciousness of current affairs.

This has both positive and negative consequences for political action and critical analysis. This sense of urgency demands immediate action against violations of law, morality, and our sense of social justice. It demands instant results. This is of vital importance. Yet I also wonder at times whether this sense of urgency and immediacy, by fanning our desire for instant results, may not be guilty of creating a sort of myopia. By focusing our attention on the possibilities and prospects of overnight transformation, it makes us forget that the seeds of dramatic institutional transformation are often planted in the small changes in everyday life. Such a myopic view little aids our efforts to gain a more sophisticated and historical understanding of the complexities, multiple zones, and uncanniness of Chinese Internet culture and politics.

Yang Guobin is an Associate Professor of Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures at Barnard College. He is the author of the recently published book, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*.

[1] Author’s note: For the use of the term “uncanny,” I am indebted to Lydia Liu, ”The Freudian Robot: The Figure of the Uncanny in New Media.” Talk at the conference on ”New Media and Global Transformation” on October 9, 2009, Columbia University.

Tags: China Report